The foundation of the Southeast Corridor Project is in itself, Environmental Streamlining. Based on years of studies and in response to significant public comment and the high rate of growth in the Denver metropolitan area, the central project goal was to evaluate and implement both highway widening and light rail transit simultaneously. The Southeast Corridor Project could do no less than respond to the rapid rate of growth with an efficient and broadly accepted innovative approach to transportation demands.

The Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) and the Regional Transportation District (RTD) were determined to approach transportation improvements through highway widening and light rail transit at the same time. This approach eliminated the need to complete two separate analyses. Agency resources were allocated and expended at one time for one project instead of two distinct projects. The public was engaged in one comprehensive public involvement process that addressed a unified transportation package instead of two separate studies. Also of note, a design-build approach to constructing the Southeast Corridor Project is being pursued to ensure that the project is implemented efficiently, economically and in the shortest possible timeframe.

Funding for both the Highway and Transit components was presented in separate statewide ballot initiatives in November 1999 and both passed by an overwhelming majority reflecting high public support for the multi-modal nature of the Southeast Corridor Project. The efficiency measures and interagency cooperation developed for this project allowed CDOT and RTD to exceed the public's expectations in delivering a project of highest quality in a greatly compressed timeframe.

Reduces Project and Process Delays
The Southeast Corridor Preliminary Engineering and Environmental Impact Statement process took just two years to complete, for a 20-mile, $1.6 billion project. From project initiation in February 1998 to signature on the Record of Decision (ROD), the process took two years, or slightly less time required to conduct a Major Investment Study of the same corridor. In fact, the project was so successful that many departments of transportation across the country have inquired as to how the project was completed in such a timely and efficient manner.

An example of reducing project and process delays occurred on November 18, 1999, when the project received three major approvals in one day. The Colorado Transportation Commission approved the 1601 process for modification of the interchanges along Interstate 25, the Air Pollution Control Commission accepted the conformity analysis and the Denver Regional Council of Governments approved the Transportation Improvement Program amendments, and 2020 Plan Amendment. This day highlights the effectiveness of multiple agencies working together to facilitate the approvals necessary to move the project forward.

Increases Amount and Range Of Public Involvement
A critical element of the Southeast Corridor project has been an extensive public and agency involvement program. This dynamic project was on the fast-track which required continual outreach to provide the most current project information to the Policy and Technical Committees assembled for the project, environmental resource agencies, and the public at large. Regular meetings and presentations were given to community associations, business and other professional organizations from project inception through the present day.

Project staff met with and made numerous presentations to neighborhood groups and civic organizations. Hundreds of one-on-one meetings were held with project staff and concerned citizens. The project designated a public involvement coordinator to address general project questions as well as a single point of contact for right-of-way issues to address questions from residents and business owners along the corridor with specific right-of-way impacts or property acquisition concerns. Both individuals were accessible to the public at all times during the project.

A Policy Committee was established to provide direction to the EIS project team. This broad-based committee composed of seventeen elected and appointed officials along the multi-jurisdictional corridor provided direction at key points in the process. Committee members were cooperative, diligent, responsive to constituents and were advocate spokespersons for the project. The multi-jurisdictional members recognized the importance of the project for the region as well as their individual municipalities.

The project team has initiated workshops with all neighborhoods and businesses districts along the corridor to discuss ongoing communication options and project aesthetics because these issues were deemed highly important to project stakeholders. To gain an accurate sense of public issues regarding impending construction, the project team conducted two large telephone surveys and convened a series of focus groups. This approach assisted project team members to develop a comprehensive communications plan, responsive to the public's preferred modes of communication during construction.

Protects and Enhances the Environment

Multiple steps were taken to ensure that the environment is protected and enhanced. Environmental issues were thoroughly addressed in an EIS process that embraced the philosophy of impact avoidance, minimization and cooperatively negotiated mitigation. The multi-modal approach actually lessened the potential right-of-way impacts and ultimately environmental impacts because the footprint of the multi-modal project was less than what would be required to address the same capacity with additional highway lanes.

Transportation demand management (TDM) strategies are another integral part of this project. This program includes commitments of funds to three Transportation Management Associations for employee bus passes, development of an Internet-based local information network, subsidized vanpools and commuter education and outreach. This program will start during construction. Commitments were also made to institute air quality monitoring systems to monitor and report air quality conditions during construction activities. TDM efforts will result in reducing the number of single occupant vehicles traveling the corridor during the construction period.

In addition, a Light Rail Station Transit Oriented Development (TOD) Program is an independent but related project conducted by the City and County of Denver. This program is intended to encourage developers to initiate complimentary development projects around the Southeast Corridor light rail stations – development that is mixed-use, transit supportive and higher density.

Integrates and Enhances Inter-Agency Coordination

A seamless team was created comprised of CDOT, RTD, FHWA, FTA and the consultants conducting the Preliminary Engineering and EIS process. This significant commitment of staff resources emphasized a ONE DOT approach. An Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) was signed between CDOT and RTD as well as FHWA and FTA. All parties agreed upon an arduous review schedule for the Draft EIS, Final EIS and the ROD. Weekly project coordination meetings with the IGA partners served to push the schedule and keep the project on course without sacrificing environmental quality.

A Technical Committee was established to gain consensus on technical decisions to be recommended to the Policy Committee. Forty members comprised the committee and included engineers and planners from local government and other public sector agencies along the corridor such as the Colorado Department of Health and the Regional Air Quality Council. In addition, key state and federal agencies were involved at various points in the process. These meetings provided technical direction regarding such issues as wetlands, wildlife, historic properties, and preliminary engineering for the project.

Resource agencies were also regularly consulted and met with project staff either individually or collectively to address issues of concern, identify project impacts and acceptable mitigation strategies and provide general guidance. For example, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and the EPA devised an innovative and successful approach to conducting the air quality intersection analysis. They agreed to divide the Southeast Corridor into sections and model only three of the worse case scenarios. This innovative and timesaving approach could likely be replicated in other cities in the country.

In conclusion, the Southeast Corridor Project is an excellent example of environmental streamlining that will make an outstanding contribution to meeting the transportation demands in the Denver metropolitan area. The multi-modal nature of the project and ONE DOT approach, embodies the four criteria for environmental streamlining. Given that, the Southeast Corridor Team feels that this extremely innovative project is worthy of recognition for the environmental streamlining category. We feel that everyone involved with the project at every level would be grateful to receive such an award.